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Born to Run: GWU Professors Share Thoughts on Purposeful Running

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Office of University Communications

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Recent Dimensions Speaker Dr. Warren Kay Sheds Light on the Spirituality of Running

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C.- Roger Bannister, the first man to break four minutes in the mile, once said, “We run, not because we think it’s doing us good, but because we enjoy it and cannot help ourselves.” For Dr. Warren Kay, professor of theology at Merrimack College, running extends beyond enjoyment to become spiritually fulfilling. Those who attended Gardner-Webb University’s Dimensions program recently were able to hear more about Kay’s ties between spirituality and running.

“We’re born to run,” began Kay. “Humans are running animals. It’s something natural, something we were made to do.” Spirituality becomes similar to running in this regard. We don’t learn how to feel that higher thing, whatever it is. We don’t learn how to have connections with something more than ourselves. It just happens.

Kay spoke of running as a sort of sanctuary, a place set apart from everything else. Although its unfixed nature prevents it from being a literal location, it provides runners with an escape from everyday life. “In religion, a sanctuary is a place where we can encounter God. Runners experience the same thing,” said Kay. “We can be in our own sanctuary.”

“I’m never alone on my runs,” said Dr. Jeff Hartman, assistant professor at Gardner-Webb in the department of Physical Education, Wellness, and Sports Studies. “I’ll run and pray. I’ll cry during runs. Sometimes they’re tears of joy and sometimes they’re just tears. They’re my praise runs.”

For Hartman, praise has everything to do with rhythm: the sound of his footsteps, the beating of his heart. The breeze. The terrain. Everything is connected.

Hartman is the founder of the Purposeful Running (PR) group at Gardner-Webb, which encourages participants to pursue healthy lifestyles through running. Kay has a similar group of his own at Merrimack. Although the group contains runners of various speeds and levels of fitness, Hartman claimed, “God will meet you wherever you’re at.”

Greg Poe, director of planned giving at the University, is part of the group. “I’ll be honest with you,” he said, “there are times when I’m cursing during my runs. But there are also times where I get into this zone. I become less aware of what’s around me. I start to think of more spiritual things.”

Spiritual does not necessarily mean religious, either. Kay spoke about society's dissatisfaction with organized religion and the shift to a more individualized spirituality. Running may not necessarily circle around Christianity, but it harvests a connection with something beyond the person running. It quenches a thirst for something more.

"More people should get involved with running," said Poe. "It betters who I am, who I'm created to be. It's made me closer to God and I want everyone to know what that's all about."

For anyone interested in PR, the group meets every Saturday at 8 a.m. across from the Gardner-Webb tennis courts. "Do it to experience it," urged Hartman. "Faculty, staff, students, alumni, community members... everyone's invited."

This year's PR challenge will be training for and competing in the Corporate Cup race in Charlotte on March 9, 2013. Runners will have the choice to race a 5K or half marathon through the historic districts of Myers Park and Dilworth. All community members, from volunteers to joggers, are invited to participate.

Informational meetings will be held in room 304 of Tucker Student Center on Thursday, Nov. 1 at 9:25 a.m. and on Monday, Nov. 5. At 2 p.m. For more information, contact Hartman at jhartman@gardner-webb.edu or 704-406-3202.